

Home Again. by Genevie

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M, every time david harbour headcanons a fanfic gets its wings

Language: English

Characters: Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers

Relationships: Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper

Status: Completed

Published: 2016-10-06

Updated: 2016-10-06

Packaged: 2022-04-01 21:26:47

Rating: Mature

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 2,801

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

The next time someone asks him why he's back in Hawkins, his mind flashes to Joyce, and queasy knots work themselves into his stomach, and he tells them that it's because he's an idiot.

Home Again.

Author's Note:

Because David Harbour said a thing, specifically this thing:

"In my romantic head, like in one fashion, like is there possibly something where like... is it maybe that he just wanted to be close to [Joyce]?"

I wrote this thing.

(source: <https://soundcloud.com/kevinpollak/david-harbour-beginning> @approximately 33 minutes)

Hopper and the double-wide have a lot in common.

They are both a little worse for wear. They sit by the lake, skewed away at odd angles, each of them an obstinate little blight on the otherwise serene and undamaged landscape. Considering either of them a part of Hawkins is an obligated kindness—a gesture extended because, despite being so distant from the town that nobody really understands why they're here, they don't belong anywhere else.

People assume that he's treating the trailer as a fixer-upper. They tell him that it'll be good for him, having a project again, and he tries not to take their words like a condescending pat on the head. Everything he does these days is good. He's getting A's for effort all across the goddamned board.

The truth is, he's fucking up. He knows he's fucking up. And he knows that nobody wants to tell him just how badly he's fucking up, so he just lets them believe whatever they want to believe to spare them the hassle. He has no plans to fix up the trailer. He has no plans to fix up himself. He does not choose to live here because potential is growing through the cracks like grass between sidewalk squares. It is simply a home without pretensions, and he is a man who is done with putting up pretences.



People ask Hopper all the damned time why he's back in town. Nobody seems capable of breaking the ice with him without making clear the fact that him returning home is an anomaly in his once promising trajectory, a curiosity worth questioning. He never knows what they expect him to say. "Well, my daughter's dead and my wife left me and I got put on probation at work because apparently my head's not in the game anymore—that's an actual quote, for the record—so I figured why not humiliate myself even more by going back to the one place on earth where everybody knows my life story?"

No. He doesn't even like to think about those things. Nevermind admitting them to others.

In response, he usually turns the question back on them—what are you still doing in Hawkins?—and that's enough to remind them that nobody wants to be asked why they aren't somewhere else. Besides, the reason why he's here is lost to him, too, no more clear than a tickle at the edge of his mind, a knot in his stomach, a slight pulling sensation that's been drawing him towards Hawkins since the moment when Diane had told him that their marriage would not survive losing Sarah.

That's not something he thinks about much, either. He is here and here he will stay, and everything else is just peripheral noise.

Or, it is until he runs into Joyce.

She doesn't ask him why he's back. Doesn't even welcome him home, really, beyond offering a casual, "Hey, Hopper, it's good to see you again." Like they had been apart only for a few months and not for over fifteen years. She tells him that the can opener he's trying to buy is a piece of shit, asks him how his mom likes California. "There's a trailer all the way out there?" she says, laughing, when he volunteers the information on where he's living now, and he realises that this is the first time he's felt normal since returning to Hawkins.

In turn, he doesn't ask her how she's been. He knows that Joyce and Lonnie can barely stand to be out in public anymore without

screaming at each other, knows that things must be even worse for her at home. It is common knowledge that Lonnie spends more time these days in strange beds than in his wife's, that Joyce spends more time at work than at home, and that the boys are bearing the weight of their parents' collapsing marriage like they're already well familiar with the burden. People call her crazy. Unhinged. Unfit to be a mother. But standing in front of her now, Hopper can only think about how strong she looks in spite of everything.

After she is done ringing him up, and after she hands him his bag and his change, he lingers, awkward, by the side of her till, waiting for her to pick up her end of the conversation.

"I'm working here, Hop," she says, slightly scolding but mostly teasing, the way she used to respond years and years ago when she was working at the burger place and he would try to sneak kisses over the counter during slow periods. Only this time, there is no fire in her eyes. She does not sneak a glance at his lips, or slip her tongue between her own, or lean forwards, willing him in small ways to inch closer, to stay for longer. She just looks tired. Maybe a little irritated.

Hopper raises his hands in defeat and backs away, half grinning. "All right, all right, I'll behave. See you around?"

"See you around, Hop."

The next time someone asks him why he's back in Hawkins, his mind flashes to Joyce, and queasy knots work themselves into his stomach, and he tells them that it's because he's an idiot.



There is a scar across Hopper's knuckles from punching Lonnie square in the mouth when they were both teenagers.

He still remembers looking at his hand as if it belonged to someone else, baffled by how much he was bleeding. Lonnie was standing several metres away, cursing wetly, his mouth equally bloody from a gash in his lip. Joyce had begun running towards them almost immediately, and though Hopper had turned all the way around to face her, she didn't spare him even a sideways glance.

At the time, he'd been so angry with her. For breaking up with him. For choosing Lonnie fucking Byers of all people. For not acknowledging that he was still standing up for her honour even after she'd left his heart shattered on the cafeteria floor. Lonnie had spent the day telling everybody who'd listen about how he talked her into giving him head at the drive-in, and he refused to shut his mouth even after learning that Joyce had skipped her afternoon classes to cry in the girl's room, humiliated.

It had only been a week since she left Hopper. In hindsight, he supposes that he was angry at her for moving on so quickly, too.

Later, she'd told him that she didn't need his protection. Didn't want his concern. They were done, she reminded him. She had broken up with him for a reason. When he asked her what that reason was, she told him that she just didn't love him anymore. He called her bluff with a kiss, soft and chaste on the edge of her lips, which she met with neither softness nor with chastity, instead turning it into something entirely more powerful.

When she pulled away, she was crying. He'd asked her why. What was wrong? He begged her to explain. But she left, and they barely spoke again afterwards.

The scar is small and white now, puckered like the skin of an orange. He studies it whenever he thinks about swinging by the store to see her, or about picking up the phone and giving her a call, and in doing so he convinces himself to leave her alone.



Hopper arrives at the bar to find Joyce in the parking lot, leaning against Lonnie's car, still dressed in her work uniform despite the store having been closed for at least two hours now. She is staring at the road, arms crossed over her chest, face drawn into a tight expression of anger. It is at once a strange sight and an unexpected one. Lonnie is, after all, here almost as much as Hopper, but Joyce has never stopped by before. Not even to drag her worthless husband home.

As he approaches, he clears his throat. When she doesn't look away

from the road he tries his words instead, asking, “Do you want to me to run inside and grab him?”

“Don't bother. He's not here.”

“Isn't that his car?”

Joyce sighs and looks up at him with eyes so distant and so sad and so worn down that he wouldn't recognise them if they didn't also look so determined. “It's only here because he rode off in someone else's car,” she says. “He thinks he's being smart. It's a small town, Hopper. People know. They'll call me if they see his car. But they can't do that if whatever bitch he's fucking now is driving him to her place.”

“You sure that's what's happening here?”

“Don't do that,” she says, and he can hear the steel in her voice, cold and hard and so solid that it doesn't crack even beneath the pressure of her frustration. “Don't treat me like I'm imagining things. I know Lonnie. I'm certain that's what's happening here. Certain.”

“Okay. So what are you going to do about it?”

She doesn't say anything, just shrugs, and he wonders what he should be doing. What he wants to be doing. Idly, he wishes that he had been wrong about Lonnie—that he had, in the misguided way of a teenage boy who couldn't understand why the girl he loved didn't love him back, underestimated his goodness. But beneath that wish he finds comfort in Joyce's brokenness. It is a horrible thought. He tries to mask it with concern and friendship and the remnants of what they'd once shared but instead he comes to bask in the comforting feeling that he's not the only one whose life is in shambles. They are kindred spirits, he thinks, and that makes her someone who he can stand to be around at length.

“Hey,” he says, leaning back beside her. “Don't let him get to you like this. He's not worth it, Joyce.”

“Oh, you don't need to tell me that he's not worth anything, Hopper, I know.” She meets his eyes with a renewed ferocity that he recognises not from having seen in flare in Joyce's eyes before, but from having

witnessed it darken Diane's. "I'm leaving him tonight. And he can't see you here because you know how he is. It'll just make things worse. So I need you to go. Somewhere else. Please. Leave."

As she speaks, her hands flutter like birds in the air and he swallows the urge to cage them in his own hands. The scar on his knuckle asserts itself with a psychosomatic ache and he flexes his fingers, collecting them into a fist. In his mind, he hears Diane's voice saying, *I need space, Jim*, and his own voice pleading, *I can't do this alone, Di*, and he considers refusing Joyce. Staying anyway. Bringing her inside the bar so that he can show her how to drown her sorrows and so that she can show him how to be open about his.

But in a goddamned trial of fire, he had learned how to do everything alone and now it's togetherness that feels strange and frightening. "All right," he says, pulling away from the car, nodding entirely too much. "I'll be inside if things go south."

She rolls her eyes. "They won't." As an afterthought, she adds, "Thank you."



Hopper does not know what he is doing. He does not know what Joyce is doing.

What he does know is that her bare skin is warm against his; that her mouth and her tongue and her touch are even warmer. When she pulls away from him he takes her in as if she is a painting, every line and scar and stretch mark rising like the strokes of a brush against the pale canvas of her skin. There is a twitch to both of their bodies, a moaning buzz curling up at the back of their throats, tiny little teases of it always rising to the surface.

She grasps onto the bedsheets as he enters her, and he grasps onto her hands. Every other part of her has already been touched, been tasted, been explored. He no longer wants to feel her fingers trailing across his skin. No longer wants to experience the sweet, almost loving intimacy which has brought them to this point, suddenly overwhelming now that the sex is almost over and the world is about to come crashing back down on them. He just wants to fuck. To feel

himself thrusting into her, to feel her rocking beneath him, to empty himself into her, all of himself, so that he can become blank again.

It ends as it began. He does not know what he is doing, staring alone out over the lake, watching the smoke from his cigarette spiral into the sky. He does not know what Joyce is doing, lingering inside the trailer, until he hears her car starting out front.

He wants her to stay. He wants to remember how it feels to not be lonely. But because he can't bear to feel connected to anyone, or to anything, he needs her to leave. He needs not to follow her. And even though she is the one moving away from him, he knows that he is the one who is running.



Sex with Joyce is an awakening.

It reignites the battle between his fear of being alone and his fear of losing even one more person who he loves. This, he feels abstractly in the pit of his stomach and in the quickening beat of his heart.

It brings to the surface his libido, once existing in inverse proportion to his grief and now occupying the same space as his urge to drink, to smoke, to pop a pill. He does not commit to memory the women who he beds as a result, their names and their faces and their voices kept in black holes at the back of his memory. Though sometimes his mind does wander to their touches, or to the finesse of their tongues, or to the throaty sounds they made for him.

What he does not realise is that the things he remembers most about these women are the things which remind him of Joyce.

He cares less about what people think of him. Less about life in general. More about softening into a persona of indifference—about regressing into the person he was in college, before he fell madly in love with Diane, before he came to understand what it means to be a father, before he was forced to explore the cavernous depths of grief with no light to guide him through to the other side.

The next time he sees Joyce he already has a reputation as a

womaniser, and he can tell by the resigned way she looks at him that she's heard the gossip, too. She's leaving the movie theatre with her boys and Hopper realises that he's never seen them before. They take after her, he thinks. Though the oldest one has his father's size and maybe a bit of his presence, too.

When she looks away from him she's all smiles, all love, and he is overcome by an angry sort of envy. Should he not be there, too, holding Sarah's hand, trying to weigh the pros and cons of buying her an ice cream cone so close to dinner? Should Diane not be beside him, pregnant with the second child they had been trying for, glowing like the light of the moon reflected off still water?

In the future, he will have fewer moments like this. He will not run from Joyce or resent that her children are alive and Sarah is not. He will turn to her for comfort in his worst moments, and in his best moments he will press his lips against hers, and he'll work his hands all across her body, and he won't fear their unknown future because just as with Sarah and just as with Diane, he knows that he will never regret loving Joyce.

For now, though, he finishes up his shift and drives immediately to the city where he spends the night doing fuck all besides fucking around, returning home only a few hours before he has to be at work.

"That's a pretty perfume," Callahan says as he passes him en route to the coffee machine. Hopper makes a point out of sniffing himself. He smells like soap; he may be a mess but he sure as hell isn't going to end a night of debauchery without taking a goddamned shower.

"Smells even better on your wife," he barks back before heading into his office with his coffee, and he contemplates the merits of moving forwards by taking steps backwards.